

Title—Empire of Religion: Imperialism and Comparative Religion

Author—David Chidester

Year—2014

Categories: Theory, Religion, Empire, Knowledge Production

Place: Southern Africa

Time: 1870-1920

Argument Synopsis:

Chidester's book offers an alternative genealogy of the study of religion, tracing the back and forth between an imperial center and a colonized periphery. He emphasizes the role of colonialism and empire in the foundation of comparative religion as a field. Chidester begins by noting how from 1600 on, frontier comparative religion was practiced by Europeans in Africa—the discovery of the existence of any local, indigenous religions in Southern Africa depended on colonial conquest and containment. Chidester seeks to document and analyze the complex relations between the emergence of a science of comparative religion in Great Britain during the second half of the nineteenth century and the colonial situation in Southern Africa. Thus, he provides a counter-history to the academic study of religion, advancing an interpretive analysis of imperial comparative religion. He strives to locate knowledge about religion and religions within the power relations of imperial ambitions, colonial situations, and indigenous innovations. In particular, he is focused on one colonial contact zone: South Africa as a crucial site of interaction. The book is a material history of the study of religion. Chidester documents the importance of African religion and the persistence of the great divide between savagery and civilization. He identifies three guiding questions underscoring the entire study: how is knowledge about religion and religions produced? How is that knowledge authenticated? And how is that knowledge circulated?

The book is organized into ten chronological chapters. The first sets out to identify the mediations (imperial, colonial, and indigenous) in which knowledge about religion and religions was produced in relation to South Africa. He deems these mediations, imperial, colonial, and indigenous, the **triple mediation**. The second chapter highlights this triple mediation in the context of the 1905 meeting of the British Association for Advancement of Science in South Africa. The middle chapters, the third through the sixth, focus on the classic theorists of religion, Max Müller, E. B. Tylor, Andrew Lang, and James Frazer. The seventh chapter turns to alternative productions of knowledge by focusing on the work of W.E.B. Du Bois. He then examines South African authors who engaged imperial theorists in producing alternative knowledge about religion and religions. Chidester contrasts three types of comparative religion, interfaith comparative religion, theological comparative religion, and critical comparative religion, all of which he argues emerged from within the same empire of religion. He concludes by providing a brief profile on the transmission of imperial theory in the rise of the study of religion as an academic discipline in the United States. Chidester highlights how knowledge about religion and religions was entangled with imperialism, from European Empires to the neo-imperial United States.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- The importance of empire in the formation of comparative religion
- The categories of 'religion' and 'religions' were produced and reproduced as instruments of both knowledge and power in specific colonial situations
- Frontier comparative religion acted as a science of local control